



The Hon. Maria Cantwell
U.S. Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

February 26, 2008

Dear Senator Cantwell:

We appreciate your leadership in researching and resolving the issues surrounding the need for a new fire station at Snoqualmie Pass. Conservation Northwest can support the Snoqualmie Pass Land Conveyance Act (S. 2601) introduced by you and Senator Murray, as part of a broader effort to resolve the issues around development and wildlife connectivity in the Snoqualmie Pass vicinity.

As you are aware our organization has a mission to protect, connect, and restore the wild lands of the Pacific Northwest, and specifically we have a strong history in the wildlife connectivity issues in the I-90 corridors near Snoqualmie Pass. Significant investment of both public and private funds in the Snoqualmie Pass area have improved the ability of wildlife to move north and south in the Cascades, while much work remains to be done as development pressure and other challenges continue.

Transferring national forest land, even for worthy projects, should not be done without compelling reasons especially in areas of such a unique landscape. You have stated that an exception should be made in this particular circumstance because of the important public service provided by the Fire District, the heavy traffic and emergency calls created by non-residents in the area, the distance of Snoqualmie Pass from other communities with emergency services, and because of the high amount of federal land ownership in the area.

We understand the need of the Snoqualmie Pass Fire District for a modern facility so that they can provide critical emergency services to those at the Pass and the thousands that travel through the area every day on Interstate 90. The current facility, leased from the national forest, is 70 years old and inadequate to serve the area. Since learning of this proposal, our intent has been to support their efforts to build a new station at a location that provides response times set out in national standards. The fire district has stated that a location on national forest land near exit 53 would provide the best response times for fires and accidents across their service area.

We also appreciate the encouragement and recognition that your February 6, 2008 bill introduction language provided to the Forest Service to engage with those who have collaborated to find common ground to the conservation issues surrounding this transfer. Your bill has reduced the acreage to be transferred to 1.5 acres, which lessens the impact. Such a move requires not only a compelling reason, but also the highest level of attention to the needs of the national forest resources in the area.



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In this case, maintaining and restoring wildlife connectivity at this upper elevation is needed to meet the objectives of the Northwest Forest Plan (Snoqualmie Pass Adaptive Management Area) and to assist with implementation of other laws such as the Endangered Species Act and Clean Water Act. We must offset the permanent impacts of the footprint and operation of the new facility, such as lost opportunities to restore habitat in this corridor and work to ensure the restoration or best future use of the old facility. Thus, it is critical that we commit to the key elements of mitigation for this project before that legislation proceeds.

Thanks to your efforts, stakeholders, including Conservation Northwest, were convened to discuss these issues. As a result, we came to an agreement that would allow the preferred site to be transferred to the Fire District as long as on-site and offsite mitigation were also done.

Mitigation to offset the impacts should be near the proposed new fire station site. Contribution of funds towards land acquisition immediately across I-90 and those near Mardee Lake are examples. We encourage your committee to provide support for this effort and to encourage the appropriations committee to provide the funds that the Forest Service needs to accomplish this.

We also agreed that it is important to minimize the impacts on site. This includes minimizing the footprint of buildings and pavement. The Fire District has committed to using best practices during construction on the site, which should include containing and treating run-off and installing native species landscaping. The project should maintain full buffers to existing wetlands and streams. Part of the planning will develop a snow storage system that will not degrade the adjacent habitat areas. The project should also restore the remainder of site to improve wildlife connectivity as described in the "Sensitive Areas Study" done by The Watershed Company in their report to the Fire District. This would include restoration of wetlands and uplands on both national forest and fire district lands.

We will continue to work with stakeholders in the area to improve wildlife connectivity in the Snoqualmie Pass area. In the past year, we have continued to work with the Washington State Department of Transportation on the I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East Project that will greatly improve the safety of the roadway for wildlife and people. We also worked with the ski area to provide additional facilities while protecting important connectivity corridors and initiating studies to better understand the needs of wildlife at the Pass, and have led the effort to form the Upper Yakima Watershed Action Group to bring together a wide range of voices to coordinate and cooperate on restoration in this key watershed including Snoqualmie Pass.

We will continue to work with the Fire District, the Forest Service and others to achieve both a needed emergency facility and adequate wildlife connectivity at Snoqualmie Pass. We appreciate your support in that effort.

Sincerely,

Jen Watkins
Conservation Northwest
3414 1/2 Fremont Ave N
Seattle WA 98103
206.675.9747 ext 203
www.conservationnw.org